

The Harmless Persuasion

Reflections of a Neoconservative:
Looking Back, Looking Ahead, by
Irving Kristol, *New York: Basic Books,*
1983. xvi + 336 pp. \$19.95.

IRVING KRISTOL IS the most articulate, the most learned, and probably the best known exponent of the body of ideas and opinions that has come to be called "neo-conservatism," a label that Professor Kristol, unlike several other writers in this movement, accepts. His most recent collection of essays and journalism is therefore a valuable book, not only for its intrinsic merits of learning and style, but also, since it does accept this label, because it may long serve as a representative text of what neo-conservatism is and what its exponents believe.

Although there is considerable overlap between neo-conservatism and the philosophical conservatism of the Old Right, the two are distinct from each other both in their theoretical presuppositions and practical applications, as well as in their historical and political origins. The Old Right, or in George Nash's phrase, the "conservative intellectual movement," originated largely as a protest against the statism of the New Deal, the internal and external threat of Communism, and the danger to traditional institutions and values (including private property and its uses) presented by modern liberalism in government, economy, and society. The Old Right in the United States took its bearings from the American experience, especially from the Constitutional tradition, and was reinforced by European thinkers such as Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss, who drew attention to the medieval, classical, and biblical roots of the American tradition. Socially, the Old Right tended to be Roman Catholic or High Protestant in religion; German, Irish, or Southern Celtic in ethnic identity; and midwestern or Southern in geographic and cultural roots.

Neo-conservatism, on the other hand,

originated in northeastern, urban universities and periodicals in the late 1960s. Its exponents have been most notably Jewish and East European in religious and ethnic identity and urban, academic, and northeastern in origins. The political impetus for neo-conservatism was, first, the threat to the integrity of universities and American intellectual life presented by the militancy of the New Left and the barbarism of the counter-culture of the late 1960s; secondly, the threat to Jewish academic and professional achievements in America presented by the quotas and affirmative action programs of the Great Society; and thirdly, the development of serious anti-Semitism on the Left and the Soviet alliance with radical anti-Western and anti-Israeli Arab regimes and terrorists. Like the prospect of being hanged, these phenomena have tended to concentrate the Jewish mind wonderfully. Historically associated with liberalism and the left in American and European history, American Jews have moved demonstrably to the right in the past fifteen years, not only intellectually but also politically.

The differences between the Old Right and the neo-conservatives in political origins and social composition largely account for the differences in political style and values between the two movements. The Old Right was anti-liberal as well as anti-Communist; the neo-conservatives are noticeably reticent in their opposition to the welfare state and their critique of liberal ideology, and their anti-Communism is largely directed toward the Soviets and their surrogates (Communist China is of far less importance to them than to the Old Right). The Old Right was committed to conserving what it took to be the unique historic identity of American society as a continuation of the Anglo-Saxon political tradition and the West European Christian tradition in social, moral, and aesthetic values. The neo-conservatives appear to have little interest in conserving the historic realities of the American tradition and, indeed, show little sympathy for the Christian heritage beyond a highly

selective amalgamation of Judaism and Calvinist Protestantism.

In place of an appeal to the ancient norms of the Western and American tradition, Kristol in these essays articulates a defense of what he variously calls "bourgeois civilization," the "commercial society," or "liberal capitalism." The United States, for Kristol, is the embodiment of bourgeois civilization, the principles of which were first articulated by the Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment of Hume, Ferguson, and Adam Smith as distinguished from the continental Enlightenment of Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau. "Out of the traditions of the Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment," Kristol tells us, "there merged a sociopolitical order that defines an important epoch in human history: the 'bourgeois' epoch, in which we Americans, at any rate, still live, though with increasing unease." Between the American Revolution (which Kristol tends to see as the Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment in arms) and the *Founding*, on the one hand, and the discontents of the 1960s and 1970s on the other, there is barely any reference to American history in these essays. For Kristol, American history as a concrete experience (as opposed to an abstraction) appears not to exist or to be unimportant.

The bourgeois order that Kristol defends "roots itself in the most worldly and common of human motivations: self-interest," and it "assumes that, though only a few are capable of pursuing excellence, everyone is capable of recognizing and pursuing his own self-interest." Hence, bourgeois society is characterized by a capitalist economy, a democratic-republican political order, and a liberal ethos that tolerates and legitimizes a high degree of private differentiation (*i.e.*, an "open society"). In its classic form, however, bourgeois society is also characterized by what Kristol calls "republican morality" or "civic virtue," a moral code that, while acknowledging the usefulness and value of material acquisition, imposes an ethic of self-restraint on the bourgeoisie that prevents it from degenerating into a col-

lection of plutocrats and hedonists. Bourgeois society, Kristol says, is "the most prosaic of all possible societies," eschewing the heroic, the transcendent, and the romantic-utopian; and the "bourgeois ideal is much closer to the Old Testament than to the New — which is, perhaps, why Jews have felt more at home in the bourgeois world than in any other."

Yet Kristol's defense of the bourgeois ideal and its institutions is not total — "The attitude of neoconservatives to bourgeois society and the bourgeois ethos is one of detached attachment" or of "*modest enthusiasm*" in recognition that "liberal-democratic capitalism" is not the best of all imaginable worlds but "only the best, under the circumstances, of all possible worlds." He recognizes the flaws of bourgeois society — what its enemies call philistinism — and its tendencies to degeneration, and his principal criticism of American society today is that it has abandoned the republican morality that the Anglo-Scottish theorists of the bourgeois ideal and their alleged disciples, the Founding Fathers, took for granted. Kristol's constant lament throughout these essays is that this moral code of bourgeois society has eroded. "The challenge to our urban democracy is to evolve a set of values and a conception of democracy that can function as the equivalent of the republican morality of yesteryear. This is our fundamental urban problem." Without a set of constraining and directing values, bourgeois society degenerates under the temptations of mass affluence. "Crime and all kinds of delinquency increase with increasing prosperity. Alcoholism and drug addiction also increase. Civic-mindedness and public-spiritness are corroded by cynicism. . . . The emphasis is on the pleasures of consumption rather than on the virtues of work. . . . 'fly now, pay later' becomes, not merely an advertising slogan, but also a popular philosophy of life."

Kristol is undoubtedly correct in his critique of the degeneration of the bourgeois order, but it is the irony of these essays

(and indeed of neo-conservatism) that he nowhere suggests either a means of restoring the moral code of a healthy republic or of formulating a new code that would be viable for a post-bourgeois society. He is partially correct in suggesting that the defense of bourgeois society distinguishes neo-conservatism from "the Old Right and the New Right — both of which are exceedingly suspicious of it." As a social and political movement, Old Right conservatism was an extension and a defense of the bourgeois forces that came to dominate the United States between the Civil War and the Depression, but intellectually the "traditionalist" wing of the Old Right argued that America was not, in its essence and origins, a bourgeois society and that the Old World roots of the American order, manifested most clearly in the traditional values and institutions of American society, predated the ideals and disciplined the appetites of bourgeois forces. Russell Kirk and the neo-Burkeans, Richard Weaver and the Southern Agrarians, *Triumph* and the Catholic Right, and Leo Strauss and his school argued with each other over the precise nature of the American order, but all were equally critical of the modernist forces that, from the Civil War to the Great Society, successfully subverted and redesigned that order. It is true, as Kristol claims, that there is an element of nostalgia in Old Right political thought, and perhaps it is true that the Old Right was impractical in much of its restorationist critique. Yet the fact remains that the Old Right not only formulated a far more sophisticated body of ideas than the neo-conservatives but also perceived the inherent weaknesses and tendencies of bourgeois society more profoundly than neo-conservatism.

As Kristol acknowledges, "for many generations capitalism was able to live off the accumulated moral and spiritual capital of the past," but was unable to produce such capital itself. The "prosaic" nature of bourgeois ideology and values was precisely the reason for this failure, and it finally resulted in the disintegration of the bourgeois ethos and the discontents

of the present day. As Kristol is also aware, the very material and organizational success of bourgeois society led to the triumph of technocratic and bureaucratic elites — what Kristol calls the "corporate revolution," but which is largely identical with what James Burnham much earlier called the managerial revolution — and to the transvaluation of the "civic virtue" of the early republic by the managerial ideologies of collectivism, social engineering, and mass hedonism. Kristol understands the flaws of bourgeois society and its ideologies, but nowhere does he firmly argue that these flaws are inherent in that society; nowhere does he develop a basis for resisting or rejecting these flaws; and nowhere does he seem aware that the corrective for them lies in the heartland of America, far from the northeastern urban academies and salons where the bourgeois pathology is bred. It is Kristol's basic error that he exaggerates the importance of bourgeois ideology in the Revolution, in the Founding, and in the American experience. Thus, by portraying America as being in the main a bourgeois order, he creates a selective and distorted picture of our national identity. If, furthermore, America is and was in its origins mainly a bourgeois society, then it contains no corrective for the inherent degenerative tendencies of that order, and those who wish to resist the mortal consequences of these tendencies must go outside the American tradition.

Kristol may be correct that bourgeois society, "under the circumstances," is the best possible world, but it is not self-evident that it will long remain possible at all. The ideological and institutional fabric of the bourgeois order has already been subverted by the "New Class" of managers and verbalists in both the private and public sectors, and it is doubtful that a defense of bourgeois values will appeal to many outside a dwindling and declining social class. If there is a future for the American Right, it lies in the heartland of Middle America that is fundamentally neither bourgeois nor New Class in its values and life-styles. In any case, Kristol's

lukewarm and circumstantial endorsement of bourgeois society can do nothing to ensure its survival. To paraphrase Whitaker Chambers, who can imagine a Marine wading ashore at Tarawa with *Reflections of a Neoconservative* in his pocket?

The most frequent criticism of neo-conservatives by the Old and New Right is that they are more "neo" than conservative and that, when things come to the crunch, they retreat into elegant reprimands of the establishment rather than advance to a principled confrontation with it. This criticism is generally sustained by a reading of Kristol's reflections, for at no place in them is there a clear break with liberalism and its works. Indeed, Norman Podhoretz, who with Kristol is probably the leading exponent of the movement, has suggested that a more appropriate name for the neoconservatives would be "neo-liberals." According to Kristol, "a conservative welfare state — what once was called a 'social insurance' state — is perfectly consistent with the neoconservative perspective," and he describes the Soviet Union not as a malevolent force for global expansion but merely as an unpleasant "great power whose interests often conflict with those of the United States." If Old Right conservatism was, in Clinton Rossiter's phrase, a "thankless persuasion," neo-conservatism is simply a harmless one, and there is no reason for the Establishment Left to drive the neo-conservatives into academic and journalistic exile as it succeeded in doing to the Old Right. The neo-conservatives may in fact be seen as the right-wing of the New Class that they criticize so much and to be engaged in an effort to moderate its collectivist and utopian dynamic with a strong dose of bourgeois liberalism.

Some years ago, in an exchange with the neo-conservative sociologist Peter Berger, James Burnham remarked that although the neo-conservatives had formally broken with liberal ideology, they retained the "gestalt of liberalism," its emotional, psychic, and moral reflexes.

The reason they retain these reflexes is that the neo-conservatives are the products, socially and intellectually, of the northeastern urban academic establishment that is the natural habitat of both the declining bourgeoisie and its pathologies and of the new managerial-verbalist class that is succeeding the bourgeois order. Irving Kristol's most recent book shows that he still retains these reflexes and many of the intellectual and political ambiguities that attend them, and that these ambiguities account for the tepid and often shallow precepts that the neo-conservatives offer. It is one thing for the American Right to accept the neo-conservatives as political allies, but this acceptance must be balanced by recognition that their ideas are not an adequate substitute for a more far-reaching critique of the bourgeois order and its legacies.

— Reviewed by Samuel T. Francis

Crusade Against Standards

The Dilemma of Education in a Democracy, by Richard H. Powers, *Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1984. 227 pp. \$16.95.*

RICHARD H. POWERS, head of the History Department at the University of Massachusetts — Boston, has been roused to passionate indignation by what he has seen happening in American classrooms in recent decades. The dust jacket's cautious concession that "many will disagree with his approach" is a rather deceptive understatement of what this author has achieved. Many will, in fact, be enraged by his severe and uncompromising attack on professional educators and also on democratic politics and liberal pieties which have brought corruption to schools and society.